

## 10. Oxana Chi and Layla Zami: Connecting to global Blackness on the move

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*Figure 8: 'Les mariées', 2019 © Christophe Schwartz*



Life stories in the form of written accounts such as autobiographies or autobiographical essays, or in films or music are important. But life stories also unfold on the level of the everyday and are tightly linked to the performance of self. In this chapter, I examine life storytelling from a more everyday perspective – following the lives of two Afro-German feminist performers, a couple whose lives are shaped by the travelling in order to connect to Black and feminist activists and artists worldwide. The chapter centres on the narration of self in daily life and the use of virtual spaces, conferences and events for connecting with others.

Following Oxana Chi's and Layla Zami's lives and practices reveals the intimate connection between embodiment and activism. In order to be a Black and queer feminist activist, I argue, one needs to embody certain political ideals, especially because in anti-racist and feminist work the body is crucial as both a site of violence and repression and as a symbol of resistance. 'Women's bodies were central to the articulation of political dissent' affirms Wendy Parkins (2000, p. 59) in her study of the British suffragette movement; while the anthropologist Barbara Sutton (2010) explores the importance of the body in women's rights protests in Argentina where *poner el cuerpo*, 'to put one's body', has become a slogan for activists:

The notion of *poner el cuerpo* has some overlaps with 'to put the body on the line' and to 'give the body' but [...] it transcends both notions. With respect to political agency, *poner el cuerpo* means not just to talk, think, or desire, but to be really present and involved; to put the whole (embodied) being into action, to be committed to a social cause. (p. 161)

Oxana and Layla are good examples of 'embodied activists' who put their bodies into action in order to transmit political ideals which transcend their private and professional lives. Political activism is important for their subjectivity, and their bodies are a tool of resistance – especially in their artistic expression. Oxana deploys dance to express her political ideals and affiliations; Layla uses her voice as a researcher and poet, and her breath as a saxophonist. Feminist and Black solidarity are also inherent in their relations to each other, standing side by side in mutual care and support, as together they work, live and perform the ideal of Black queer love.

#### Meeting Oxana Chi and Layla Zami, two Afro-feminist performers

This was my first conference that was also a site for fieldwork: the Afro-europeans conference in Tampere, July 2017. I thought about it as a rite of passage, because it would be the first time that I would present my research on transnational mobility and Germans of African descent to an audience that was personally and professionally involved in constructions of Black identities in Europe, with a majority of participants being Afrodescendant themselves. One of the first talks I attend in the big halls of Tampere University is a lecture-performance by Oxana Chi and Layla Zami, part of a panel organised by Natasha Kelly, a sociologist interested in colonialism and feminism and an Afro-German activist herself. After their lecture-performance, in which Layla lectures and Oxana performs, I go up and talk to them. I congratulate Oxana, and she tells me that she once met Angela Davis in New York and that her performance is about that encounter. 'The time she spent in jail', Oxana explains, 'that marked her, it shook her, you could feel that when you saw her, there was a fear, although it is so long ago, and today she is a famous researcher and activist.'

She has tried to translate this encounter and history into her performance. I first talk to Layla about my research, and she seems interested. I get straight to the point and ask her: 'Maybe I can come see you at a performance when you travel somewhere or travel with you?' And Layla says, 'Well yes why not, I will talk about it with Oxana; it would be great, if you get funding for that it'll be great!' I tell her that funding is not a problem and that I actually have it already. After Oxana agrees as well, I tell them that I will contact them for further details. Then they show me a DVD 'Dancing through Gardens' which they have brought to the conference. It is about Oxana dealing artistically with the biography of a famous dancer from 1920s Germany, Tatjana Barbakoff, who was murdered in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. (Fieldnote, Tampere, 4 July 2017)

In one sequence of the film, which I watched a few months later in Frankfurt, Oxana is at a dance festival where she introduces herself: 'I am German-Nigerian and studied Javanese dance. I am interested in contemporary dance and politics, too. So my dance is focused on history, work and women.' It turns out later that this DVD is an important piece of memory for Layla and Oxana, as it is through that dance piece that they met in Berlin and Layla became first a member of the film crew on the documentary and later also Oxana's life partner and now wife. Since that first encounter at Tampere, I have met up with Oxana and Layla at three conferences (Finland, France, Canada) as well as while they were living in Berlin in 2017 and in New York in 2018, where I was able to observe more of their professional exploits and to participate in their more private and intimate life. I was able to get a glimpse into their lives and what it means for them to be active in Afro-feminist networks; how much that matters for their understanding of self, family and community, how important the notion of Black queer feminist sisterhood is for them.

Throughout their lives, transnational travel has become a condition to build and practise community in a double sense: experiencing a globally entangled Afro diasporic and feminist activist community as well as relating to each other as a Black feminist queer couple. Oxana and Layla are both part of Black feminist activist movements where a quest for African origins is important for the creation of a personal African diaspora identity. In the Black and feminist political movements they navigate, life storytelling is part of that identity-building process and is related to the feminist mantra of framing the personal as political and the political as personal. Several of the conferences and events that I attended with them between 2017 and 2019 featured life-story panels, where people told their own biographies, whether Black Canadian lives, Black German lives or AfroEuropean lives.

Toronto, Canada – Visiting Oxana and Layla and travelling to the Black German Research and Heritage Association conference, 2018

After my talk at the Black German Research and Heritage Association in Toronto in May 2018, it is the turn of Daniel, a USA-based sociologist, who presents his research in which he looked at Black German identities, national and global Blackness and everyday understandings of Blackness and Germanness. What he does not say in his talk is that he collected all of his interviews at the annual meeting of the ISD – the Initiative for Black People in Germany, which is a political association advocating for the rights of Afrodescendant people and fighting racism in Germany. This is a political activist association and, to my knowledge, if you go to a meeting of the ISD or even know that the organisation exists you will already have been familiar with some of the political discourse on Blackness, and you will have dealt intellectually with the theme of racism and racialisation in a German as well as American context. I would not say that this is an everyday understanding of what it means to be a person of African descent in Germany; it comes from a left-wing, middle-class political activist community where people of African descent specifically claim a Black identity as well. If one wants to understand Black identities in Germany, the analysis will have to take class and personal trajectories more into account, because whereas the term 'Black' might refer to all African American people broadly, the same is not the case in Germany, where speaking of oneself as 'Black' still carries a certain political identification and awareness. (Fieldnote, May 2018)

*Figure 9: Oxana and Layla at the market in Cannes (France), 2017,  
photo by author*



## Life stories in the lives and works of two artist-activists

### Oxana Chi – the use of biographies in her work

Oxana was born in the early 1970s, but I do not know much about her experience growing up, as she is rather private. I only have bits and pieces of the story. She was inspired by Audre Lorde's feminism and May Ayim's Afro-German activism, and she evokes them both in some of her dance pieces. Her influences are far reaching and range from the USA to Taiwan and Indonesia. Born in Frankfurt, she grew up in Bochum in the Ruhr Valley, the child of a German mother and a Nigerian father. In an interview I found, I read that she has seen her father just once, when she was six years old and that he founded and chaired the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka (Wellershaus 2009). Oxana is in contact with relatives in Nigeria and has visited them. She grew up in a small town close to Bochum and mentions having brothers and sisters. When Oxana speaks about her childhood, it is happy memories that she communicates – how she was always an entertainer and started performing in their garden when she was little. How she went to a Waldorf school (based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner), where creativity was encouraged. The stories she tells me about her life and travels relate to her passion and career as a dancer and performer. To follow this path, at the age of just 16, she went to live independently from her family, studying at a dance theatre in Düsseldorf that had been founded by an African American artist. After that she went to Folkwang University of the Arts, a well-known college in Essen (also in the Ruhr area), where she learned modern and classical dance, later moving to Berlin, where she worked as an independent artist. Oxana has travelled to many different countries and is influenced by a variety of different techniques and dances ranging from Tai Chi to Indian Kathak and Indonesian traditional dances, but the themes of her pieces are informed by her Black feminist ideals and are often shaped around famous Black or Afrodiasporic women or Women of Colour. Her piece 'Killjoy', which she performed at the AfroEuropeans conference where I first met her, was inspired by Angela Davis and Sara Ahmed's concept of 'feminist killjoy' as Layla Zami explains during the lecture-performance. At the next conference where I met the duo, in Cannes, they presented 'Dancing through Gardens', which is about the dancer Tatjana Barbakoff, who was of Russian Jewish and Chinese descent. The piece Oxana and Layla performed in Toronto, 'I Step on Air' is about May Ayim and her relation to Germany, her fight against racism and her journey to Ghana.

Oxana uses less of her own life story to talk about themes such as racism, marginalisation or political and artistic activism, but cites other biographies that tell stories about these themes. She brings these women back to life in her performances. Nevertheless, she does draw connections to her own life in these dance pieces. When she talks about Barbakoff, for example, she underlines that she feels

a spiritual connection to her, and that they have things in common. Oxana draws connections between the racism that killed Barbakoff and the racism that still exists today, in Berlin and elsewhere, which Oxana is confronted with, too.<sup>1</sup> She connects to the biographies she performs, but her own stories stay in the background. In an interview I did with her in Berlin, Oxana explains her piece 'I Step on Air' and how she understands herself in connection to the Afro-German movement:

Oxana: I Step on Air is dedicated to May Ayim, but it is also about travelling [...] first she is in her little world in Berlin and then there is the wish to get to know another world and then she is in Ghana with Togbe (her grandfather) [...] and because she was a very political person it is also about politics, how we get invited and then uninvited again as people who are binational [...] With 'we' in this context of May Ayim, I mean the Afro-German movement and People of Colour movement in Germany. Especially in Berlin, where she met Audre Lorde, the African American poet, and Dagmar Schultz and Ika Hügel, who supported her, and lesbian feminists in general.

When talking about the political significance of her piece, Oxana, uses 'we' to refer to the Afro-German, People of Colour and feminist movements to whom she sees herself connected. 'We' as binational people, 'we' as people who get invited and then uninvited again, 'we' the Afro-German movement in Germany and Berlin in particular. Thus, the piece is an affirmation of her political affiliation and community.

*Figure 10: Oxana Chi performing Dancing through Gardens in Cannes, 2017, photo by author*



<sup>1</sup> Barbakoff, who was of Jewish-Chinese-Russian origin, had to flee to France, but was captured by the Gestapo in 1944 and deported and killed in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

## Layla – a cosmopolitan presentation of self

Oxana's wife, Layla, is a researcher. When I began my research, she was completing a PhD at The Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies at Humboldt-University in Berlin, Germany with a work on the interrelations between performances and diasporic identities in the work of contemporary dancers. She later became faculty member at Pratt Institute and is now a Postdoctoral Researcher at Freie Universität Berlin. Her dissertation was published in 2020 by transcript under the title 'Contemporary PerforMemory: Dancing Through Spacetime, Historical Trauma, and Diaspora in the 21st Century' (Zami 2020). At the time of publishing her book, it received an Honorable Mention in the Oscar G. Brockett Prize in Dance Research in the USA. I met Layla at the 2017 AfroEuropeans conference in Finland. Layla presents herself on her personal website as 'an innovative academic and artist working with words, music, performance, and video. Born in Paris, France in 1985, Layla gains inspiration from a rich and complex Jewish-Russian-German and Afro-Caribbean-Indian heritage.' Layla shares the name Zami with Audre Lorde's biomythographical figure. Her mother is from the Caribbean island of Martinique, while Lorde's mother was from Carriacou in the same region. Layla works with Oxana, who is her friend and lover, which connects to the meaning of Zami: 'Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty' (Lorde 1983, p. 14). Zami highlights her connection to the matrilineal side of her family, as this is a family name in Martinique. In conversations and at conferences, her diverse cultural heritage is a frequent topic.

I visited Layla and Oxana in New York and we travelled together by train to the Black German Heritage conference, which Layla had told me about and where I applied to present my work after Oxana and Layla had talked about me to the organisers.

We are sitting on the train, and Layla has just finished putting together her presentation for the performance at the conference. We agreed that we would do an interview on the train. Layla comes to sit next to me, and I try to switch on the recorder. But the batteries are dead. So I use my cell phone. During our official interview, I never get the feeling that what Layla tells me was not thought over first; she is very considered in her choice of words and stories. She tells me a bit about her private life but not too much, no other love stories or identity struggles – everything seems quite smooth. Layla is eating a mango, she loves mangos, she says they remind her of her grandparents' house in Martinique. Before we start I tell her that I am interested to hear her life-story, but she also knows that I am interested in travel and mobility. (Fieldnote, 18 May 2018)

For the first years of her life, Layla grew up in Paris, and the family moved to Berlin when she was nine and back to France when she was fourteen. In her twenties, Layla decided to move again to Berlin, which she still considers (one of) her home(s), although for a while now her and Oxana have been living in New York (between 2018 and 2022). Layla has a very interesting family history of migration, which she tells me about:

Berlin became my home [*Heimat*] and that was an interesting turn of events because the parents of my father are German, Jewish German and my mother is from Martinique.

And the family on my father's side was German for generations, for many generations. They left Germany in 1933, and my father wanted to go to Berlin to reinstate that connection. [...] He wanted to have a relationship to German culture, and maybe he did not say 'he felt German' but almost in a way, and that was something my grandparents did not understand. And the interesting part is, I think it succeeded best with me, because I did – we moved to Berlin [and] lived there for a while, and after that I returned there myself to Germany, and now I have already lived half of my life in Berlin.

As dealing with and embodying her family heritage is very important for Layla and her understanding of self, she applied for German citizenship a few years back:

I started the process, and it felt uncomfortable [dealing] with the authorities, a bit at the limit sometimes with how they treated you; because I made use of the law that was made after World War II, that if your parents or grandparents were German and had had citizenship taken away from them, then if you live in Germany again after however many years then after one or two years you are de facto German.

The law she refers to is Article 116 of the German Constitution, stating that every person and their descendants have the right to (re)acquire citizenship if it was revoked between 1933 and 1945. The text of the law makes it seem easy, but Layla gave up because of bureaucratic hurdles; she felt discouraged, as the offices were asking for many official documents which were very difficult to get owing to the persecution of her grandparents during the war.

Layla's father is a businessman in the field of screen printing and her mother is a medical doctor; Layla has one younger brother. Her parents were part of a politicised left-wing upper middle class milieu and had friends all over the world. Layla was introduced to left wing and anti-racist politics from a very young age through her parents and developed an interest in politics early on. As a teenager, she read a lot of African American literature (something she has in common with Maya and Aminata). Her interest in Africa and African diaspora also dates back to a very early

age too. When the family moved from Paris to Berlin when she was nine, she became best friend with a girl whose family was from Cameroon. The father of that friend was Prince Kum'a Ndumbe, the founder of *AfricAvenir*, an African diasporic organisation for political education. It was also through this family that Layla was introduced to Afro-German activism, as the mother of that friend knew May Ayim personally and was acquainted with Afro-German organisations. 'I always saw the book, on the bookshelf, at the Kum'a Ndumbe family's house', Layla said referring to May Ayim's book *Grenzenlos und Unverschämt* (1997).

Layla's biography seems quite different from the others I have presented so far. Her politicisation started very early and has always been a part of her life through her friends and family. She grew up with her Caribbean heritage as a normal part of her life through her mother and trips to Martinique to see her grandparents, which the family could afford to do every year. Her Jewish heritage also accompanied her throughout her life, and she had her Bat Mitzvah at the age of fourteen; it was her personal wish and not something that her family, who are very liberal, asked of her. As a young teenager, she spent two summers at Camp Kinderland,<sup>2</sup> a Jewish left-wing liberal summer camp in the USA. Later, she was an exchange student in South Africa as part of her studies at Sciences Po Paris and did an internship at AfricAvenir in Cameroon. She graduated from Sciences Po with a MA in International Relations at the age of 21 and became a collaborator to Christiane Taubira at the French Assembly in Paris. Layla has already embodied a Black political and feminist identity for many years and is very self-confident about it and her relations to her diverse cultural heritage.

In Layla's private life, travelling to connect with her transnationally dispersed family is important, and always has been since she was a child. In her adult life, she brings her transnational experiences to bear in her presentation of her professional identity, too, as a researcher and artist. She uses her diverse personal heritage to present political messages on intersectionality, feminism or Blackness, just as Audre Lorde used to do. And she embodies these political ideals in her private life. The influences run in both directions.

#### Jewish museum Berlin

In Berlin in 2017, I went to several events in which Layla was involved – these included the Jewish Museum's event 'New Jewishness: alliances in a post-migration society'. On the podium, five scholars and writers that understand themselves to be part of a contemporary Jewish diaspora in Germany discussed the importance of building alliances between marginalised groups in society. When the moderator addressed Layla for the first time, after 15 minutes, asking

<sup>2</sup> The youth camp has its website at: <http://campkinderland.org/> (accessed 7 April 2020).

about her work on intersectionality and her personal experiences of discrimination, she decided to answer another question that was addressed earlier, a question about the importance of alliances.

Layla: First I would like to say something about building alliances. I think it is beautiful and important that you united us over that theme here today, because for me, there is no future without alliances. And I really mean that; alliances are not just a catchword for me, but the headline of my life. I myself am the result of a very large alliance which happened thirty-three years ago, between Jewish European Russian and Afro-Indian Caribbean communities. And in my daily life I deal with the importance of alliances too, how can alliances be encouraging, productive, creative? (Fieldnote, November 2017)

Here Layla stresses the importance that alliances have by making use of her biography and biological descent as a symbol for cross-fertilising alliances across difference. Her performance of self often foregrounds her transcultural heritage, and in this way she is able to build a coherent self which is based on multilocality, multinationality and multicurality, and which stands in stark contrast to nationalist ideas of ethnic uniformity – something else she confronts in her work as an activist and researcher. Layla was the only Black person on stage and did not want to be reduced to discussing experiences of discrimination. She decided to answer the question on discrimination differently, talking about how well she had been received by the Jewish doctoral scholarship programme ELES – Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich Studienwerk,<sup>3</sup> and that instead of discrimination she felt a strong solidarity between people there.

## Practising community digitally and in mobility

Oxana and Layla often post photos and texts on digital media about their work or their latest travel destinations. This is also a way to construct an ideal of the self. When I talked to Layla, she liked to associate herself with the late Ghanaian-German poet May Ayim. During our interview, she told me that she felt that Ayim was her soulmate, that she felt a deep connection to her life and work. In August 2019, Oxana and Layla travelled together to Ghana to perform the piece 'I Step on Air', which Oxana had choreographed. For the occasion, Layla created a Facebook post. The post showed a picture of May Ayim with a Kente headband, and the text read:

This is May Ayim (1960–1996) brilliant, beautiful Ghanaian-German feminist writer, activist, performer, teacher. I feel incredibly honoured and moved to

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<sup>3</sup> The scholarship programme's website is at: <https://eles-studienwerk.de/> (accessed 30 November 2020).

travel to her roots and perform in Oxana Chi's dance-music-word-performance-tribute at the University of Ghana Legon this month. (Layla, post July 2019).

In the comments section underneath the post, several people told Layla that she resembles May Ayim in the photo. This shows that Layla's self-understanding and association with Ayim does not stand alone, it is also confirmed by others. This confirmation of the resemblance is a way of narrating the community not only as political but also as extended family, through the use of kin terms such as, in one comment 'Ancestors live' or when Layla calls her friend 'Tati', a French nickname for aunty. Narration of self does not happen in isolation; the audience is vital. The social media post has manifold functions: It is way to promote their work, to make the iconic Afro-German figure of May Ayim better known to the world and to remember her, and to create a self that is related to Ayim and to the Black political movement worldwide.

A few weeks after I went with them to the conference in Toronto that united people over Black German studies, Oxana created a digital post about the event, including some photos they had taken.

Transnational Perspectives on Black Germany... the Conference was brilliant, and the audience loved our performance and presentation! Here are some impressions from our beautiful time in Toronto with great academics, art and super yummy food. [...] (Oxana, Facebook post June 2018)

At the conference itself, Oxana and Layla's practice of taking group photos often reminded me of family gatherings, where there is always one aunt taking group photos and constantly reminding anyone who was not in the mood that afterwards everyone would surely be happy to have that image for posterity. One comment under the photo album, from Dr Rosemarie Peña, Founding Director of the Black German Heritage and Research Association, ran: 'Wonderful photos! If only we could relive these moments. I miss everyone so much!' The photos and the act of taking them were an act of community-making too. Taking and sharing pictures of an event at a later stage helps create a feeling of belonging that one can have access to retrospectively. You can look at these pictures and at the same time, by commenting virtually, engage in communication from a distance. In this case, the community is one of people working on issues relating to Black Germans. People at the conference unite there for a few days but live in very different places and only meet very occasionally, so to create a community in such transnationally dispersed circumstances is no easy task. Thus, a social media group for a research network is supposed to create a certain continuity among a transient community – to keep the imagination of it alive.

Oxana and Layla are part of a Black feminist activist community in which a claim to African origins is important for a positive affirmation of one's African descent. In

these Black political movements, life storytelling is part of an identity-building process. As artists, moreover, Oxana and Layla curate their own biographies carefully. Oxana uses her art to relate political stories; she gained expertise in biographical storytelling through her work as a dancer and performer. Layla gained that expertise through her academic engagement and by being an active member of Oxana's performance group. In both cases their artistic self is intertwined with their activist self. By being who they are and doing what they do for a living, they are always politically active. When Oxana and Layla tell me about their life and travel experiences, the act of narrating these is an act of confirming their Black and feminist activist selves. Sharing personal stories with other people of African descent is another way to build this feeling of community. The anthropologist Naomi Leite (2017) argues that people who have been involved in a particular identity movement (in her case, Jewish Marrano identity in Portugal) have more developed narratives of self because they have dealt a lot with their own biographies and discussed them with members of the identity movement and others. They use their biographies and, in particular, certain events in their lives to stress how their Jewishness was reflected and revealed to them. The telling of their lives becomes a testimony of their Jewishness where other evidence is almost impossible to find, as Jews were expelled or forced to convert during the Inquisition between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. This sharing of stories paves the way for a rebuilding of the Marrano community. The sharing of a story for Oxana and Layla can happen anytime, more likely at events and conferences dedicated to the themes of Black identities, but also randomly in an everyday situation – for example while on the train.

#### Life storytelling during a chance encounter

In May 2018, taking the train with Oxana and Layla from New York, where they currently live, to Toronto to attend a conference organised by the Black German Heritage and Research Association, where they are invited as keynote performers, I notice at one point that Layla has started a conversation with an African American woman sitting behind them. Before the conversation, they had already introduced themselves to her as two Afro-German performers. After a while I join the conversation. Layla says to Oxana, 'You know, this lady has already been to Gorée island in Senegal and in Ghana!' The woman in question is an African American woman from Brooklyn, and she quickly begins to tell her experiences of group roots travel to Ghana and Senegal. An artist and gallerist in her forties from Ghana, who was living and working in Brooklyn too, had organised this trip with friends and acquaintances from around the USA. So they went there with a group of over 100 people. That was twenty years ago, in the 1990s. A friend advised her to bring an empty suitcase because she would buy so much stuff there. 'What a wise decision', she remembers. I ask her what she bought, and she says a stool, Kente cloth and many more items. She

goes on to relate more of her experiences to Layla and Oxana: 'It was amazing. I could wander the streets there: all black people; nobody was bothering you, all Africans. That felt so good' she says. And we all nod and agree when Layla asks her: 'And in Senegal, did people think you were from there?' 'No', she answers. 'People were very different there.' In the first sentence she affirms her belonging to a global Black and African community while in the second she underlines the cultural differences she felt, as well as the differences between the two countries visited..

Layla and Oxana are planning to go to Ghana in August of 2018. They will attend a conference in Accra and perform their piece 'I Step on Air'. Layla says that when they go to Ghana she is also very interested to learn about the history of the slave trade, because she carries Caribbean heritage in her too (her mother being from Martinique). 'Maybe Oxana, as she is Nigerian-German, maybe she is not that interested in that...' But Oxana contradicts this instantly, saying that of course she is interested, why wouldn't she be. The woman goes on to relate more of her family history, saying that her great-great-grandmother used to talk about the red soil in Africa, and that when she then looked out the window of the plane in Ghana it was amazing to see this with her own eyes, 'Red soil everywhere!' (Fieldnote on the train, May 2018)

This encounter on the train and the random conversation that arises is a way of practising and creating Afro diasporic identification and embodying the idea of Black community and solidarity. Talking about their African roots with this woman, sharing bits of personal family stories that relate to an African heritage, and sharing stories from their lives in New York or Berlin, allows Layla and Oxana to learn more about what it means to be a person of African descent in today's world and to affirm themselves as such. What creates a sense of community in this encounter is the reference to a symbolic place for the African diaspora: Ghana is one of the most important countries for African American roots tourism. The woman on the train has been there already and as Layla and Oxana are planning to go there soon they can exchange information about their (expected) experiences. Beyond these everyday interactions, it is through narration, dance, research and attending conferences on Black and feminist themes that Oxana and Layla practise their diasporic identification and community very consciously. In her ethnography, Leite writes that the encounters between Portuguese Marranos and international Jewish heritage tourists 'fulfil a desire for direct contact, putting face and flesh to the abstract image of "the Marrano"; as a near second it is about emotion and interpersonal connection' (2017, p. 186). This desire for direct contact reflects very well what happens at the conferences and events I attended with Oxana and Layla. It is a wish to connect, to align one's agendas, yet also a way of exploring the many differences that the African diaspora constitutes – and to celebrate that diversity.

### Curating life stories at conferences

Oxana and Layla try to regularly attend conferences that centre on Black and Afro-diasporic or feminist themes. At these conferences, a space is created where being a Black activist and researcher suddenly becomes the norm instead of the exception, because one is surrounded by people who do the same things and know the same references as oneself. At such conferences, the presentations of life stories are more curated than in daily practice and the performance – whether it be in words, or via dress, music and/or dance – becomes central.

#### Conference in Toronto

Going through the programme of the conference in Toronto, I realise that life stories form a big part of the panels and that the topics of many presentations are personal transnational autobiographies between the USA and Germany or narrated biographies (such as I present) of Germans of African (or African American) descent or African Americans of German descent.

When I asked one woman how she came to know about the Black German Heritage and Research Association (BGHRA) conference,<sup>4</sup> she told me that she had already attended the conference several times [it has existed for about ten years and takes place every two years]. She was studying in the German Studies department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. This young woman with impeccable German and English was obviously friendly and familiar with many of the organisers; she often sat in the front row and greeted many of the presenters. She told me that her first BGHRA conference had been very exciting for her because it had been the first time she had shared her own story. She was on the organising committee and had narrated her life story – the way she framed it, I imagined it like a rite of passage to activism. I, too, chose to present life stories at this conference, mixing Oxana's story with those of Ika Hügel-Marshall and May Ayim. Although I obviously could not share my own story, as I was not of African descent, I learned through reading Black German life stories, and by listening to those of other people of African descent at conferences, how to narrate them in a particular way, focusing on certain aspects of the biography – such as growing up as a racialised person (woman or man) and feelings of exclusion and not fitting the norm, and how the building of connections to other people of African descent in one's own country or elsewhere helped in the process of dealing positively with African origins and to find a voice against racism. For me, too, this conference felt like a rite of passage for understanding the importance of life stories in Black movements. On the second evening of the conference, Oxana and Layla's performance takes place, including spoken word and music by Layla and dance by Oxana. They

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4 The conference website is at: <http://bghra.org/ut-2018/>.

perform it in a theatre on the university campus. The performance is meticulously curated and, although they have shown the piece at many different festivals over the years, they spent a lot of time practising and preparing for this performance in their New York studio, where I was able to attend one of their training sessions. For the evening in Toronto, Oxana has nicely shaped her red Afro and put on clothes the colour of red earth, which is often associated with West Africa. Layla has donned a colourful jumpsuit and sports a hairband with several patterns on it that underlines her connection to an African heritage and also connects her to May Ayim, who used to wear hair-wraps. Oxana curates her dance pieces from head to toe, and for every piece she has a special dress made, usually by her favourite seamstress in Berlin. Layla begins with a short lecture introducing the work of May Ayim. After that she joins Oxana in a performance where Oxana dances and Layla plays instruments and performs a poem by May Ayim. (Fieldnote, May 2018)

Figure 11: Performance of 'I Step on Air'. Photo 1 by the author, photo 2 by Kearra Amaya Gopee © Oxana Chi



Oxana describes the piece 'I Step on Air' thus:

[it] takes the audience through May Ayim's historical engagement as a poet, writer, activist and academic in Germany and her experience as a Black German woman tracing her roots to Ghana. The encounter of circular storytelling, grounded in West African narrative traditions, innovative body language, and atmospheric music, results in an entertaining and meditative show.<sup>5</sup>

5 For more information about the performance, see: <http://www.oxanachi.de/productions/i-step-on-air.html> (accessed 4 February 2020).

The West African connection can be found in many details – in the materials they use, the colours they chose, Oxana's movements and Layla's music. It is a really enchanting and indeed meditative show. It is only after their performance that Oxana and Layla are truly able to relax and enjoy the conference, and I can sense how lucky they feel to finally be able to engage with the conference attendees and general public after the show and in the following days. They continue the conference by making connections with other researchers and by carrying on with their practice of taking numerous photos, which is a ritual of theirs at such events and gatherings. It is their way of creating and enlarging their Black feminist global community – the photos give them something that they can share with the attendees. As well as being sites of professional connection, these events also represent another form of community-making. Being at events with other Black and feminist activists offers a space for relaxing and restoring energy levels to continue the fight against racism and sexism. To spend a while with a community of like-minded people and with many Black women gives them strength to confront life where Black people and People of Colour are minorities that suffer racial discrimination.

### **Taking time off from performing – self-care**

Throughout Oxana and Layla's lives, transnational travel has become a condition for building and practising community in a double sense: by experiencing a globally entangled Afro diasporic activist community and by relating to and building a global network of dancers, performers and researchers. Because Oxana and Layla travel a lot and get to know many different people, the creation of routines while traveling and the creation of time just for the two of them outside the conference setting is essential to keeping up a happy mindset in such a mobile life, where the lines between public and private are blurred. The only time I met Oxana alone was in Berlin. It is here that they have their extended networks of friends; as Oxana and Layla previously led separate lives in Berlin, their activities and the people they know are diversified. While travelling together and at conferences, I noticed that they stuck together a lot: performing together, sitting together, coming and going together. In a place or at an event where you are not familiar with most people or with the environment, it is normal that you stick with the person that you know best, I believe. It gives comfort. At the three conferences that I attended with them, Oxana and Layla withdrew from group activities from time to time in order to spend time on their own, working, doing dance practice or discovering a new place. In France and Canada as well as on the train from New York to Toronto, I was able to be present during some of that private time. Travelling together with your participants opens up the potential of 'new convivialities' (Coates 2017, p. 240). At a conference in Cannes in December 2017, which was about dancer biographies and exile, I joined in their rou-

tines and a familiarity quickly developed, especially through cooking together. Here, as in Toronto, their first activity was to go and check out the market.

### Strolling and cooking

In Cannes, I meet Oxana and Layla on the street. We want to go together to the Marché de Forville. 'We always go to the market when we travel', they tell me. The night before, they had written a message to ask me if I had a kitchen in my rental accommodation, because then we could cook together. They only had a small kitchenette, and were not really able to cook there, which stressed them out a bit, because they always prefer to cook for themselves when they travel. Fortunately, I did have one. This way I was able to spend some more time with them, chatting while chopping the carrots. Cooking together, much like travelling together, created a certain kind of intimacy. We were able to get a feel for each other and talk more freely about what interested us. I explained in more detail about my research project and youth in Frankfurt, and we chatted about various things. To share these intimate moments was for me very important, as otherwise I only saw them during the conferences and events where we had many distractions and where a performance of self is more in the foreground. (Fieldnote, Cannes, December 2017)

Important as it is for both Layla and Oxana to build a global network with Black and feminist activists and dancers, the aspect of self-care as a couple and as individuals is crucial, too. It can also be seen as embodying Black feminist ideas, where such self-care is a form of political resistance against oppression (Lorde 1988).

### The Black activist self, couple and community in mobility

Both Oxana and Layla embrace a hybrid understanding of diasporic identity, where movement and uprootedness are characteristic traits of self-perception (Gilroy 1993, Hall 1990). They engage with the African diaspora in mobility – through Oxana's moving body and by travelling transnationally.

A few days before going to the conference to Toronto together, we sat on the rooftop of their apartment in New York and spoke about feelings of home. I told them that I too was interested in the topic of home and mobility because I had the feeling, in my personal situation of being a mobile researcher, that the more I travelled, the more I had a longing to be just in one place and not move: 'I feel it is special that you have each other when you travel and move.' They both agreed. 'I would say that yes, at this point, Oxana is my home,' Layla argued, 'We have become real nomads.' What particularly interested them about my project from the start was the notion of travel, as it had become very important in their lives as travelling artists and academics. Oxana and Layla are what I would call 'embodied activists'. Their

political ideals transcend both their private and professional lives. But even in their cases, having an activist identity as Black and feminist was a process and was not just there from the beginning – although, as Layla explains in this chapter, her family education meant she had already become sensitive to anti-racism. In his research on Chicano/a identities of Mexican Americans, Luis Urrieta underlines four important steps in the process of activist identity production: '(1) intellectual engagement, (2) activist rites of passage, (3) leadership, and (4) raising consciousness' (2007, p. 131). These steps were clearly important in the trajectories of Layla and Oxana, who are constantly engaged in raising awareness of racism and sexism and are not afraid of leadership in that regard – they even embrace it by supporting each other in their activities. Yet there are further elements important to them as activists: the constant wish to connect to other Black and feminist activists and create global networks of solidarity. In order to foster these connections, life storytelling plays an important part in the professional context of performances at conferences and events, but also in everyday conversations as it creates points of empathy.

*Figure 12: Oxana and Layla in New York, 2018. Photo by the author*

